

Our Failing Education System and Discrimination Against Students

Introduction

In political discussions, a common topic is infrastructure. According to Merriam-Webster, infrastructure is defined as “the underlying foundation or basic framework (as of a system or organization).” (Merriam-Webster) Few people would argue that infrastructure should not be a top priority in our country. However, what many people fail to realize is that the United States is currently neglecting one of the most fundamental aspects for a successful, strong infrastructure: children’s education, and specifically public education. Between the increased closing of public schools, overcrowding in classrooms, pressures to increase standardized testing, and changing policies with the new administration, many students are set up, and will continue to be set up for failure if the course doesn’t change.

Michigan’s Public Schools

In 2010, Michigan passed a bill which specified how the state would identify its lowest performing schools, or “Priority Schools”, and created the School Reform Office to supervise the identified schools. (SRO) Initially, the School Reform Office was run by the Department of Education. However, in 2015, Executive Order 2015-9 was made, which transferred the oversight of the School Reform Office from the Department of Education to the Department of Technology, Management, and Budget. Rather than education reform being in the hands of the education department, it was transferred to a new department that did not specialize in the topic. The reason for this, most likely, was to make budget cuts and save the state money. This

was a red flag as to the future of the state's education system, and the state is now sacrificing students in struggling communities to save money.

Under the direction of the School Reform Office, schools that consistently perform in the bottom 5% will face forced closure from the state. On January 20, 2017, the School Reform Office released the list of schools facing closure. Thirty-eight schools are currently facing closure in 2017; twenty-five of these schools are located in Detroit. (Higgins 2017). The Detroit area has some of the highest poverty rates in the state of Michigan. Based on 2011-2015 income estimates, Highland Park, a city located in greater Detroit, was ranked first on the list of Michigan's poorest communities. (MLive). While the School Reform Office claims to be making efforts and providing resources to help the students in Priority Schools succeed, it appears to be more of an attack on low-income families. Contrary to what the School Reform Office is claiming, the schools are not being provided with even basic conditions for learning. In January 2016, photos were released by teachers, students, and parents that showed the real horrors and poor quality of the Detroit schools, accompanied by a lawsuit filed against the state. The photos and reports showed rodents, mold, heating and structural problems, and other conditions that were against state regulations. (AlHajal 2016). When students aren't even given minimally adequate conditions to in which to learn, it's difficult to expect them to succeed as students.

Overcrowding currently plays another factor in the challenges of public schools, and will only present more of a problem as the state continues to shut down schools. For example, when Detroit students are forced out of their schools due to closures, they'll have to find new schools to attend. Unfortunately, these schools may be up to 50 miles away from their homes,

making it challenging, if not impossible for many students to attend school. For a lot of students in the Detroit area, walking, biking, or public transportation is their only way of traveling through the city. One of the efforts being made by the state is to combine schools, such is the case with Durfee Elementary-Middle School and a nearby school, Central High School. Unfortunately, along with overcrowding there will be a large age gap between students, which will be both challenging for students and teachers. David Sharpe, parent of 8-year-old Durfee student David Jr., told the Detroit Free Press, "They can't fit all those kids in Durfee in that school. A lot of kids are going to have to go to different schools. The younger kids are going to be exposed to the older kids. That's not right." (Zaniewski 2017). Other families were in tears when they found out about the potential school closures. The families and children do not deserve the poor treatment and neglect that they are receiving from the state. As of March 14, the Detroit School Board has officially vote to sue the state and fight the closures of their schools.

Changing School "Standards"

There are several pros and cons of standardized testing. One of the greatest pros of standardized testing is that it holds teachers and students accountable in the classroom. It is a scientific, measurable method to determine the success of students, as well as how they are being taught. Standardized testing also allows students across the country to be compared. By comparing students' test results, education professionals are better able to determine what methods are working and what methods are not. When does standardized testing become too standard, though? For example, standardized testing does not take into account external factors, and only measures a student's ability on a given day. For example, a student may be

having trouble at home, or a student may simply struggle with testing. Does a poor testing ability actually measure how well a student will succeed? Many students feel that because they do poorly on standardized tests, they are not worthy or skilled enough to achieve their goals. Standardized testing sets some students up to believe that they cannot be successful. (Columbia University). In a study of 66 urban schools in the 2014-2015 school year, standardized testing begins in Pre-K. Students reached their peak of standardized testing in 8th grade, in which they averaged 25.3 hours spent testing throughout the school year. (Layton 2015).

Standardized testing specifically hurts students in low-income communities. One reason behind this is that schools often lack the resources to help students perform well on standardized tests, specifically state-mandated tests. There are several companies that manufacture textbooks, but the top three that are often seen and used are McGraw-Hill, Pearson, and Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. Consequently, standardized testing is often based off of the material in these textbooks. Thus, the wording on standardized tests mimics that of these textbooks, which gives an advantage to students in higher-income areas whose schools can afford to purchase these textbooks, as well as update them as needed. Schools in low-income areas often cannot afford these textbooks, let alone update them as frequent as necessary. These “Big Three” textbook manufacturers’ books are the most expensive, which hurts students in low-income areas. (Broussard 2014). Because of this, students aren’t being provided with the resources necessary to set them up for success on standardized tests. For standardized tests to be effective, there needs to be a level playing field for students

nationwide. Without this equality, students in low-income communities will continue to be discriminated against in the education system.

Education and the Current Administration

Following the 2016 Presidential Election, the most controversial confirmation hearing, among many, was the confirmation of Betsy DeVos as the new U.S. Secretary of Education. DeVos, who was behind the privatization and school-of-choice movements in Michigan, is continuing to push a similar agenda for the United States as a whole. Unfortunately, DeVos's movements failed many of Michigan's school systems. DeVos's "legacy" ties into the current state of the Detroit school systems. A majority of the schools in the Detroit areas are charter schools and choice schools that were created under DeVos. Unfortunately, these schools lack the quality and resources required to be successful. Unlike public schools, charter schools require less regulation, which has led to their diminishing quality. Also, while students in the Detroit area are choice schools, none of the schools within close distance to them are top schools. As discussed earlier in this paper, a majority of the Detroit area schools are Priority Schools. School-of-choice further discriminates against those living in low-income areas. While some families may be capable of dealing with the financial and time burdens of traveling to an out-of-district school, the option still isn't available for many families. This policy continues to bolster the schools who are already succeeding, as well as provide even more opportunity for higher income families; in contrast it creates less opportunities for children of lower-income families.

The privatization of schools is also cause for concern. In the past, private schools have not received funding from the government. However, with the use of vouchers (which has been and will continue to be pushed by the DeVos family), the government would be funding private schools, further diminishing the quality of public schools. Middle-class families wouldn't qualify for these vouchers, and an over-whelming majority of lower-class families still wouldn't receive assistance. The only thing that the vouchers would do is bolster the private school system. (Strauss 2016).

Another threat to public schools and low-income communities is DeVos's lack of knowledge in regards to education policy. DeVos's experience in the education community mainly extends to her throwing money into failing programs. As a member of a wealthy family, DeVos has never had to apply for financial assistance. DeVos's children never had to apply for financial assistance. Even if DeVos does care about the education system and actually creating equal academic opportunity for all students, she cares about profit and wealth even more. DeVos's role as the Secretary of Education is also raising concern from advocates for students with learning disabilities. When asked about the 42-year-old Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), in which the Federal Government provides states with funding to assist students with disabilities, DeVos said that compliance with this law would be "best left to the states". She later backtracked and said that she "may have confused" the law. Maybe DeVos doesn't understand the law, or maybe she disagree with IDEA; either way, it is alarming, and it shows that she is not fit to be in charge as Secretary of Education. (Thompson 2017)

Conclusion

There are several threats facing the current state of the education system, both in Michigan and throughout the United States as a whole. Unfortunately, several of these threats are continuously directed toward lower-class and minority areas. Equal access to education is a basic human right. Quality education needs to be a staple in our country, and should be seen as a fundamental aspect of infrastructure in the United States. The current state of the public school system in Michigan; the increased push for standardized testing and how it discriminates against certain communities and students with other academic strengths; and the threat of our new Secretary of Education, should all be indicators as to why the U.S. needs to take more initiative to improve the education system. Only when each child is a priority and all students succeed, will our country fully succeed.

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